Chapter 14

Beckett's Invisible Matter: Echo, Technology and Posthuman Affect

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A peculiar affect attaches to the theme of technology in Beckett. Alongside the familiar investment in aboulic characters, in minimal stirrings of life drained of will and desire, we recognise in his writing a signature indulgence in excessive emotion. Its main signposts: a play on invisible matter, a dramatic configuration of body, voice and machine, and a preoccupation, sustained throughout his work, with the myth of Echo. The pathos poured into Krapp's tape recordings is perhaps the most striking example of this thematic knot. But subtler and more revealing expressions of the connection between affectivity, technology and the Echo myth are found elsewhere – for instance in the impersonal rhythms of *Rockaby*, in the choreography of *Footfalls*, or in the near impossible staging of *Not I*.

In all three texts, technology is part of the formal construction without being represented or thematised directly, a prominent but unseen feature of Beckett's work. *Not I* dresses Mouth with an '*Invisible microphone*' (Beckett, 2006, 376); in *Footfalls*, May's pacing routine is famously set to the tick-tock of a 'metronome' (Asmus, 1977, 85); and *Rockaby* requires the rocking of the chair to be 'Controlled mechanically without assistance from W' (Beckett, 2006, 434). More than a prop, technology in these works is kneaded into the subject's environment. It connects visible and invisible realities, inner motion and material change. Time and again we recognise its ghostlike presence in subtle manipulations of space; in mechanical rhythms that encroach on the body and determine its movement; or in a reversal of the values of firstness and secondariness that traditionally attach to the relation between original speech and its technical reproduction, as in *Rockaby*, where W echoes her own recorded voice.

On this last point – indeed on *all* three points – it is *Not I* that provides the most interesting case study. I should like to begin my discussion of the play by

focusing on the image of the '*Invisible microphone*', at once a marginal detail in Beckett's original stage script and, incidentally, a figure for the pairing of voice and technology on the Beckettian stage. It straddles the boundary between theatrical prop and stage direction. It begins life as an unseen object, but quickly transforms into an abstraction, a cypher for the impossible coordination of voice, body and stage space. It projects a voice that is simultaneously amplified and hushed, pathetic and colourless, frantic and dying, intensely physical yet disembodied. And in a sense it is also a metonym of Mouth herself: Mouth as character and mouth as body part.

'Invisible microphone'

In her autobiography, Billie Whitelaw offered an invaluable backstage record of the experience of performing *Not I*, documenting the extraordinary physical and psychological toll taken on her by the role:

> I didn't realise until much later that with the two seasons of *Not I*, I had inflamed an already damaged spine and neck. Performing in that play, all the tension that went to the back of my neck also aggravated the vertigo and nausea I'd had in my early twenties. I'd come to terms with this: the damage is something I'm stuck with. In fact, every play I did with Beckett left a little legacy behind in my state of ill-health, a price I have most willingly paid. (Whitelaw, 1995, 131)

This testimony has been echoed by Lisa Dwan in numerous public lectures, newspaper interviews and articles.[1] A list of injuries sustained during the run includes pulled muscles, cuts to the face and ears, scabs, migraines, temporary loss of vision, serious damage to the neck, and a hernia caused by the requirement to push out air violently while firing words at the audience at unsustainable speed.[2] Dwan singles out two elements of the production as particularly punishing: the first is Beckett's instruction that the monologue be delivered 'at the speed of thought' (2013b), while the second, a part of the set design, is best described as a stocks-like contraption, effectively a harness to which the actor must remain strapped for the duration of the performance in order to keep her head suspended in complete immobility.

Both the harness and the instruction to speak at the speed of thought plug into a broader discussion of staple Beckettian themes. Far from being incidental elements of Dwan's staging and performance, they fix the spatial and temporal coordinates of the play and give concrete expression to its treatment of voice in relation to materiality. Like the harness, the conceit of an impossibly

accelerated, strangely amplified voice contributes to a radical misshaping of the body. No longer a shared matrix of human experience, the body is torn up, pushed against extreme spatial and temporal limits, its rhythms and geometries bent into less than organic form.

In order to unpack this image, it is necessary first to consider the strange pairing of speed and immobility as it relates not only to key elements of the play's performance text – the choreography, the rhythms and the interaction between body parts on and off stage – but also to the pathos invested in Mouth's monologue, the network of themes and allusions, and what we might still call the referential action. Several commentators have drawn attention to the meta-theatrical implications of Beckett's treatment of space and time in the play. Beckett's turn to dramatic form in the late 1940s is often identified with a progressive retreat from representation and a movement towards an increasingly material, non-referential art of space and body. Steven Connor, for one, discusses Beckett's use of stage space as a rejection of the metaphysical distinction between concrete and abstract reality, an attempt as it were to grapple with the immediate physicality and the irreducible *thereness* of the theatrical event. Beckett's theatre, Connor argues, 'eschews the ambition of representing anything but itself', and appears to seek the 'convergence of the space that the plays represent with the actual theatre space in which they are performed' (1998, 142). Yet that same drive towards unmediated physical presence is somehow countered by the insistence of a technologically mediated moment. This is especially evident in Beckett's writing for TV, which consistently 'refuses or complicates the sense of the physical as natural or given' (160). But it is also true, in a more general sense, of his manipulation of theatrical space.[3]

In line with this reading is the stage direction that has Mouth suspended '*about 8 feet above stage level*' (Beckett, 2006, 376). As several critics have noted, this detail ensures that the scene is not easily recuperated to the more familiar representation of a fully embodied speaking subject. In Derval Tubridy's words, the 'speaking mouth has no body, at least none which the audience can discern since the location of the mouth [. . .] in no way approximates the location of the mouth of any speaking body on stage' (2018, 88). Similarly, for Dirk Van Hulle *Not I* 'presents Mouth as a body part that is a prosthesis in and of itself. By separating the Mouth from the rest of the body the TV version even intensifies the idea of this body part acting as the voice's instrumental mouthpiece' (2009, 50).

The salient point here is that Beckett's stagecraft offers a check to the anthropomorphic imagination. But in doing so it also invites a reflection on the relation between the body as an organic whole, and the body as a disorganised collection of parts. Even as the lighting and staging props present a mouth suspended in mid-air, detached from the rest of the face, the harness

speaks to a state of inescapable embodiment and to an experience of the body as an unsurpassable limit. In this connection, we must consider the actor's immobility in *Not I* as an overdetermined feature of the play's treatment of space. First, it re-inscribes the pathos of confinement and inescapable physicality within a scene that appears, at face value, to foreground lightness and disembodiment. Secondly, it stands in dramatic contrast to the frenzied activity of the mouth, an obscene spectacle onstage. Complicit with the lighting cue that makes everything around the mouth invisible, immobility helps establish the detachment of the part from the whole. From this perspective, it obeys the same logic and fulfils the same function as the invisible microphone. As the latter amplifies the voice, immobility brings the lips, teeth and tongue into stark relief. Finally, it lends itself to an allegorical reading, wherein we recognise in the extreme passivity of the actor's frame an original and irreducible condition, a more general passivity that sets up Mouth's relation to the rest of the face, and to the rest of the body. This is a passivity inherent in all figuration, predicated of all things that fall into the background, predicated *of* the background itself. It is the very *ability to be affected*, an elemental disposition by which we are first given to enter into relation with the phenomenal world.

Speed is the easier element to unpack, relating as it does to the activity of the mouth onstage. It concerns the movement of the lips and the quality of the voice. But speed is also a significant detail of the *story* of *Not I*. It gestures beyond the time and space of performance to a time and space encoded in the monologue's network of references. The drama of *Not I* is that of a voice that *surprises* the ear, of a speech that stirs *suddenly*, and of a monologue delivered *in extremis*:

> when suddenly she realized . . . words were- . . . what? . . who? . . no! . . she! . . [*Pause and movement 2.*] . . . realized . . . words were coming . . . imagine! . . words were coming . . . a voice she did not recognize . . . at first . . . so long since it had sounded . . . then finally had to admit . . . could be none other . . . than her own (Beckett, 2006, 379)

Here the speed Beckett required of Whitelaw's delivery is more than a test of the actor's breathing, and more than an assault on the spectator's nerves. Mouth's speech is not simply fast; it is hurried. Its desperate pace inscribes within the action of the play a sense of impending mortality. We learn that Mouth has awakened to a 'stream of words' (380) sometime around her seventieth year, having been 'speechless all her days' (381). The speech is compulsive, but also terminal, delivered as if to make up for lost time.

Central to this thematic score are two intertextual figures. The phrase 'so long since it had sounded' (379), combined with the staging of a 'faintly lit'

form (376), and the premise of a voice brought back to life after a long silence, recall Virgil's first appearance to Dante in *Inferno* I, an allusion that recurs across Beckett's body of work:

> Mentre ch'i' rovinava in basso loco,
> dinanzi a li occhi mi si fu offerto
> chi per lungo silenzio parea fioco.
> [While I was falling down into a low place, before my eyes one had offered himself to me who through long silence seemed hoarse.] (Alighieri, 1996, 28–9)[4]

Daniela Caselli comments on the significance of this tercet for Beckett, dwelling in particular on the semantic complexity of the last line with its puzzling conflation of visual and acoustic detail. Robert Durling translates 'fioco' as 'hoarse' (Alighieri, 1996, 29), but the more accurate gloss would be 'faint' or 'feeble':

> In the critical tradition of the *Comedy*, 'che per lungo silenzio parea fioco' is usually interpreted as an 'acoustic metaphor', as a translation of 'a phonic emotion into a visual one' to indicate a blurred image surfacing from the surrounding darkness as if from a long absence. (Caselli, 2005, 124)

The ambiguity, as Caselli notes, befits Virgil's status as a shade, his being not of this world. Dante's initial difficulty in perceiving the faint image is as much an indication of the state of his soul, an allegory of his remoteness from the poetic and spiritual ideal represented by the classical poet, as a reflection of the latter's liminal existence, his 'ghost-like appearance [. . .] translated into the image of the threshold between speechlessness and voice' (124).

The allusion expands the restricted world of *Not I*, gesturing beyond the stage space and the time of performance, and complicating the semiotics of a text that, by all accounts and in every other aspect of its construction, calls for minimal colour, minimal connotation and minimal expression. 'Less colour', as Billie Whitelaw recalls (qtd in Gussow, 1996, 84), was Beckett's frequent recommendation to his actors when aiming for a more restrained emotional tone. In the case of *Not I*, the use of that expression to mean a quality of voice resounds ironically with the lines from Canto I, reminding us that the very same compression of visual and phonic data admired in Dante's tercet was central to Beckett's conception of the play. The 'faintly lit' mouth (Beckett, 2006, 376), the breathless delivery, the pathos of a speech produced with great difficulty after a prolonged silence – all reverberate with the memory of that famous

literary precedent. Even the description of Mouth's monologue as a 'stream of words' (380) echoes Dante's apostrophe of Virgil as the wellspring of 'a river of speech' ['Or se' tu quel Virgilio e quella fonte/che spandi di parlar sì largo fiume?'] (Alighieri, 1996, 30–1). But if Dante's metaphor is meant to convey the expansive character of Virgil's rhetoric after the first weakness is overcome, Beckett's phrase points ironically to a compulsive, unstoppable logorrhoea.

The second key intertext I wish to draw attention to here is the story of Echo. For the time being, it will suffice to say that allusions to Echo and Virgil in the play are entirely complicit – that they form a kind of palimpsest. Both figures stress the disconnection between voice and body; both render the voice as weakened or weakening, and imagine an unsubstantial self, suspended between presence and absence. Less obviously, and perhaps more importantly for my argument, both Virgil and Echo are associated with the theme of love, but a pathetic love, experienced as loss or longing. In Virgil's case, it is the knowledge of being banished from God's grace, a dignified despair he shares with other souls in limbo. In Echo's story, it is a hopeless, unrequited desire.

Beckett invokes these associations as cues to the thematic and the affective content of the play. We hear them ironised first in Mouth's own repeated professions of the absence of love in her life, a condition she happily accepts, even welcomes, as a small mercy: 'so no love . . . spared that . . . no love such as normally vented on the . . . speechless infant . . . in the home . . . no . . . nor indeed for that matter any of any kind . . . no love of any kind . . . at any subsequent stage' (Beckett, 2006, 376). In Beckett this theme is almost always bound up with the question of God's mercy:

> that notion of punishment . . . which had first occurred to her . . . brought up as she had been to believe . . . with the other waifs . . . in a merciful . . . [*Brief laugh.*] . . . God . . . [*Good laugh.*] . . . first occurred to her . . . then dismissed . . . as foolish . . . was perhaps not so foolish . . . (Beckett, 2006, 377)

This is to say that the solace Mouth finds in the absence of love corresponds to the small measure of comfort that comes of evading an all-seeing, all-sustaining, ultimately judgemental gaze: 'God is love . . . she'll be purged . . .'; and again a few lines down, 'God is love . . . tender mercies' (381). And yet this acceptance of the comforts of lovelessness and invisibility strains against the urgency signalled by the compulsive character of Mouth's speech, and by the intense physicality of her situation. We are tempted to hear, in the breathless delivery, an appeal for community, for attention, for 'a gesture of helpless compassion' (375). Perhaps the play's sharpest irony rests in the way it dramatises this double bind in Mouth's impossible relation to her own speech.

Mouth experiences her words at a remove, yet the sentiment that animates them could not be more real, nor the physical presence behind them more immediate. The allusion to Echo – and the use of intertextuality more generally – amplifies this paradox, redoubles it at the level of staging *and* story. Simultaneously apposite and tonally incongruous, the effect is of a borrowed emotion added to the already heightened emotional intensity of a bruisingly physical performance.

Mind, Matter and Affect

The idea that Beckett's writing is characterised by a mechanical or machine-like emotion is not new. Over the last ten years, the critical conversation around this theme has been shaped by a series of responses to Martha Nussbaum's claim that Beckett's work is permeated by feelings of disgust and guilt at the realities of the flesh. Nussbaum speaks, to be precise, of 'a peculiar movement in Beckett's talk of emotions [. . .] from a perception of human limits to a loathing of the limited, from grief to disgust and hatred, from the tragedy and comedy of the body to rage at the body, seen as covered in excrement' (Nussbaum, 1988, 251). Rightly or wrongly, she associates this indulgence in negative affect with a certain moral and psychological hollowness that attaches to character motivation and agency in the writer's fiction:

> Beckett's people are heirs of a legacy of feeling that shapes them inexorably. They cannot help being shaped in this way, and they feel like 'contrivances', like machines programmed entirely from without. (250)

Arguments against this interpretation gathered momentum in Beckett scholarship with the publication in 2011 of two seminal articles, by Linda Ben-Zvi and Jean-Michel Rabaté, both delivered earlier that year as keynote lectures at the *Out of the Archive* international conference in York. Nussbaum's main fault, according to her critics, is a failure to attend to the rhetorical complexities of Beckett's writing, those elements of literary form (rhythm, cadence, alliteration, intertextuality, irony, humour) that cannot be reduced to a univocal philosophical statement. As Ben-Zvi observes, Nussbaum may be correct in emphasising disgust as the dominant affect in Beckett, but in ignoring the subtle modulations of his use of language, especially his humour, she remains tone-deaf to the redemptive, even joyous vein that runs through his engagement with abject matter (see Ben-Zvi, 2011, 684). Rabaté's commentary is even more trenchant, billing Nussbaum's focus on Beckett's religious sensibility as a case of 'bad literary criticism. We are given either reductive or unfounded religious readings or

simplistic psychoanalytic readings rehashing platitudes about the mother, the father, and the debasement of libido' (Rabaté, 2011, 704).

Many scholars have taken this critique on board. Yet, over the last ten years, the discussion of Beckettian affect has continued to hew close to the lines set by Nussbaum's analysis. In particular, her suggestion that Beckett's characters 'feel like [. . .] machines programmed entirely from without' (1988, 250) still orients posthumanist approaches to his work.[5] I should like to fill in the critical background to the argument I develop here by distinguishing three complementary perspectives:

1) A techno-historicist angle, highlighting the influence of late industrial mechanics and second-order cybernetics on modernist thought, and drawing out their resonance in Beckett's work; 2) An exploration of the significance of mechanical processes and machine imagery in Beckett's representations of mind and matter; and, by extension, a look at the impact of technology on his engagement with questions of imagination, sense-perception and embodied experience; and 3) A study of the textual-materialist dimension of Beckett's art – rhythm, repetition, genetic materials – to emphasise the correspondences between mechanised inspiration and human compositional process.

A key figure, for all three strands, is Katherine Hayles, whose pioneering work invites us to think of the posthuman turn historically, as an event precipitated by advances in late twentieth-century cybernetics, but also philosophically as a critical engagement with questions of embodiment, cognition and virtual experience in the digital age. Hayles takes issue with a fantasy of digital immortality, which transhumanist mythologies were far too quick to embrace: the idea that it should be possible in some near future, as human environments become increasingly cybernetic and empirical reality is reduced to information, to dematerialise the self altogether, to digitise consciousness and remove it from the inconveniences of embodied experience. The critique is, at heart, anti-Cartesian, and feeds into a broader discussion of the relation between virtual bodies and artificial intelligence. In Hayles's own words,

> the posthuman does not really mean the end of humanity. It signals instead the end of a certain conception of the human, a conception that may have applied, at best, to that fraction of humanity who had the wealth, power, and leisure to conceptualize themselves as autonomous beings exercising their will through individual agency and choice. [. . .] When Moravec imagines 'you' choosing to download yourself into a computer, thereby obtaining through technological mastery the ultimate privilege of immortality, he is not abandoning the autonomous liberal subject but is expanding its prerogatives. (Hayles, 1999, 286)

The argument offers up the posthuman as a fitting historical context to Beckett's experiments with passivity and diminished agency. Indeed I would argue that any discussion of the commonalities between Beckett and posthuman theory must engage with these quintessentially Beckettian themes – must consider the extent to which the progressive encroachment of technology on human environments informs modernist discourses on the exhaustion of the individual will and illuminates narratives about the limits of spiritual and physical ability.

Building on this approach, but extending the field of inquiry beyond the cybernetic and digital ontologies explored in Hayles's book, Andrew Gaedtke offers a compelling account of the impact of communication technologies on the treatment of mental illness in late modernist fiction. His reading of Beckett centres in particular on the writer's interest in schizophrenia, and on his turn to radio, 'a medium heavily entangled in modernist experiences of radical mental illness' (Gaedtke, 2017, 154) and a uniquely apt platform from which to explore the symptoms that characterise schizophrenic delusion – not only a figure but a technological instantiation of a psychic space traversed by voices, a mind so far extended into the world as to have lost its mooring in any sense of inner self. Radio, Gaedtke observes, 'became a means by which schizophrenic experiences of auditory hallucination, depersonalization, and a loss of ego boundaries could be narrated and rationalized' (175).[6]

My own contributions to the debate (Borg, 2012 and 2019) have focused on the phenomenological paradoxes encoded in Beckett's figurations of posthumous life.[7] Beckett's fictions, I suggest, adopt and radicalise a typically modernist reflection on the status of technology as a condition of historical change. This is to say, first, that the insistence on mechanised movement in his work puts pressure on protocols of representation that still rely on a dialectical distribution of reality between the spiritual and the material order. (Viewed as a meta-historical force, technology is precisely what occupies the middle ground between nature and culture.) And, secondly, that it complicates the entire system of values that equates freedom with interiority – and interiority with moral agency and a talent for self-determination. Within this interpretive framework we must consider the machinic affect Nussbaum associates with Beckett's characters not as the symptom of a diminished humanity, but as the mark of a structural change in the history of subjectivity – and more precisely, a change in the historical articulation of those existential grammars one associates with post-Enlightenment models of being in the world.

Alys Moody speaks similarly of 'an affect that neither emanates from nor belongs to a subject – an inhuman affect' (2017, 93). Focusing on a series of textual and rhythmic effects in *Ping*, she points to the way in which Beckett's

writing systematically overturns humanist expectations regarding the status of emotions as a shared dimension of human experience. Beckett's text, Moody argues, 'stages affect neither as an irreducibly personal response, nor a quintessentially human one, but instead as the point at which human and machine, feeling and meaning, logical and aesthetic form blur into indistinction' (95). The experiment hinges on a 'disconnection of affective surface from sense-making' (91), and disables the very idea of emotion as positive narrative content, as something to be represented and signified.

All three approaches outlined above lend themselves to a broader critical and methodological application, aligning the study of affect with textual (or indeed medial) materiality and with what remains unrepresentable in a literary work. Notably, Beckett's attention to rhythm as a privileged dimension of rhetorical performance dovetails with his depiction of the body as a broken down, dis-organised unit. In addition to locating the production of affect in the realm of the unsignifiable and the unrepresentable, rhythm plays precisely on the conjunction of the impersonal and the bodily. It fills a space *between* bodies, unfolds compulsively, drives movement and alters moods. It speaks to the unity of sense experience when it accompanies choreographed gestures, but wanes mechanical as it breaks down into simple, punctuated segments. We recognise this dynamic across Beckett's work, as a characteristic feature of his engagement with that radical ontology that comes under the heading of a posthuman turn in modernism. Indeed, to the extent that it disassembles bodies and disables the distinction between organic and inorganic forms, the foregrounding of a technologically determined environment in *Not I* finds a thematic anchoring in the overdetermined status of Mouth as character, as body part and as obscene prosthesis.

It is not enough, then, to say that Beckett's attention to machine life goes hand in hand with the supersession of Enlightenment definitions of the human; or even that a posthuman-modernist ontology underpins the exploration of a machinic affect in his work. Rather, we must look at how Beckett's treatment of affect is bound up with his figural strategies and with an exploration of the material-and-spiritual processes that condition those strategies; how it is also always a redrawing of the human body, an interrogation of its ability to interact with its surroundings, to shape space, to process manifold sense perceptions into unified experience, and ultimately to constitute itself as the ground of such a process.

'The Whole Machine'

The critical conversation sketched out above highlights the difficulties of a precise techno-historical reconstruction of the continuities between modernism and

posthuman thought. If Hayles's narrative rightly points to late twentieth-century cybernetics as a paradigm-shifting event in the emergence of the posthuman subject, Gaedtke's discussion of Beckett's turn to radio at once complicates that periodisation and raises the philosophical stakes: from a history of Mind that comes into its own with the promise of artificial intelligence and distributed cognition, to a discourse on mental illness wherein modernity confronts its own limit in the form of an increasingly porous subjectivity.[8]

Beckett's use of the Echo/Virgil palimpsest in *Not I* – and more generally, the recurrence of the Echo myth across his entire body of work – plainly reinforces this point. It condenses many of the themes associated with a modernist prefiguring of posthuman ideas: it combines the motif of a disembodied voice compelled to interminable speech with an image of hollowed-out interiority, and it cues the narratives of 'thought broadcasting' that critics identify with Beckett's use of radio. But, more than anything else, it is the heightened affectivity signalled by the myth that defines the technological situation of *Not I*, and that, notwithstanding a date of composition squarely coinciding with the cybernetic turn, aligns it with an earlier modernist ontology.

Two details in Mouth's monologue seem directly to indicate her awareness of the technological environment surrounding her, namely a repeated reference to a buzzing sound 'in the ears' or 'in the skull' (Beckett, 2006, 378), and mention of a 'machine' (378, 380) that seems to stand for the apparatus of the face as a whole. It is important to note that both details come into relief when the text approaches the possibility of Mouth's proprioception, or when it touches on what little relation to self she is able to afford:

> gradually she felt . . . her lips moving . . . imagine! . . her lips moving! . . as of course till then she had not . . . and not alone the lips . . . the cheeks . . . the jaws . . . the whole face . . . all those- . . . what? . . the tongue? . . yes . . . the tongue in the mouth . . . all those contortions without which . . . no speech possible . . . and yet in the ordinary way . . . not felt at all . . . so intent one is . . . on what one is saying . . . the whole being . . . (Beckett, 2006, 379)

The references to a 'whole face' and a 'whole being' strike a jarring note here, especially when viewed in connection with the strategies of self-effacement, fragmentation and avoidance of any sense of plenitude that govern Mouth's rhetoric. Yet the continuation of the passage clarifies that the feeling of wholeness, like love, is one Mouth can only contemplate through its absence. The point is pressed further when the attribute is metonymically transferred from the order of organic life (being, face) to that of a machine:

> but this other awful thought . . . oh long after . . . sudden flash . . . even more awful if possible . . . that feeling was coming back . . . imagine! . . feeling coming back! . . starting at the top . . . then working down . . . the whole machine . . . but no . . . spared that . . . the mouth alone (Beckett, 2006, 379–80)

The phrase 'the mouth alone' redoubles the visual impact of the mise en scène and tempts us, for a moment, to close the gap between the figure on stage and the object of her recollection. But it is the metaphor of the machine that organises the figural and logical relations internal to the text. The weight of the passage hangs precisely on the tension between *whole* and *part*, between an intuition of the Self as unitary being, and an experience of the face reduced to bits of disassembled machinery: tongue, lips, jaws, cheeks – and elsewhere, ears, eyelids and skull.

This dynamic aligns with Van Hulle's description of Mouth as a 'prosthesis' or an 'instrumental mouthpiece' (2009, 50). Beckett himself famously characterised Mouth's speech as 'a purely buccal phenomenon without mental control or understanding, only half heard. Function running away with organ' (Beckett and Schneider, 1998, 283). The image of the face as a disassembled machine lends evidence to these views. More importantly, it speaks to the connection between Beckett's figural strategies, his treatment of the body, and the ontological underpinnings of his work. That is to say, it indicates a peculiar understanding of the immanence of the body within the phenomenological field.

Key to both a modernist and a posthuman imaginary, the paradox of a mouth that experiences its face as a machine presses the question of how the body constitutes itself – of how it builds itself from multiple parts, from part to whole, as the ground of perception. The challenge, in thinking through this strange pairing of affectivity and mechanical existence, is precisely to reimagine the machine as a model for the self-constitution and self-organisation of matter.

I am reminded, in this connection, of the use of close-up in Fernand Léger's 1924 film *Ballet Mécanique*, a striking illustration of a certain high modernist investment in the body as a collection of parts. In Léger's visual language, rhythm is deployed as pure machinic affect, a reduction of material reality to its primary, self-organising procedures. The purpose is to emphasise the objectal character of body parts, to abstract the fragment to the order of pure form, and place the hand, the legs and the face on a single ontological plane as a clock, or a piston ring, or a cylinder.[9] Beckett's machine aesthetic is different: not nearly so exuberant about the possibilities of merging the mechanical and the organic, nor so obviously enamoured with the association of technology and modernity. In *Not I*, the disassembled body never ceases to be flesh.[10]

Ultimately, what best defines the technological environment explored in the play is the intuition that the mechanisation of affect inherent to the modernist experience, does not abstract the body but penetrates the phenomenological field, alters it, at the hyletic and formal level simultaneously. As mentioned, the metaphor of the machine concerns not only the relation of whole to part and of part to whole, but also the status of the *body part* as detached fragment or self-organising matter.

It is fitting, too, that the reference to a proprioceptive faculty, including the description of the return of feeling, follows a measured, gradual process, an awareness of movement *first*, 'gradually she felt . . . her lips moving' (Beckett, 2006, 380), a faint stirring, then the urge to imagine, and finally the dreaded sensation of being given to thought: 'that feeling was coming back . . . imagine! . . feeling coming back!' (380).

In describing Mouth as 'a purely buccal phenomenon' (Beckett and Schneider, 1998, 283), Beckett meant primarily to emphasise the identity of image and voice, and to sever the runaway organ from any semblance of interiority or self-relation. But the metaphorics of the machine in *Not I* bring a different aspect of that same expression into relief: Beckett's interest in the phenomenality of the disassembled body, that is to say, of matter captured in the moment of its emergence to view, and of the image in the process of its materialisation.

Notes

1. In the same vein, Dwan likens her meeting with Billie Whitelaw, in 2006, to an encounter between 'two shell-shocked war veterans' (2013b).
2. The experience is recorded by Dwan in two articles written for the *Guardian* (2013a and 2014), and again in interviews with Tim Masters for the BBC (2013b), with Sarah Hemming, published in the *Financial Times* (2015), and with Eben Shapiro for the *Wall Street Journal* (2016). Note, in particular, Dwan's account of Whitelaw's recollection: 'When I met Billie in 2006, we bonded immediately [. . .] She recalled what Beckett had told her: "You can't go fast enough for me"' (2013a).
3. On the nuances of reading *Not I* as a remediated text – between literary script, theatrical performance and TV – see Dirk Van Hulle (2009).
4. This is a notoriously difficult tercet to translate. Robert Durling's version, cited here, has the merit of being faithful to the original almost word for word; but it sacrifices rhythm and poetic effect. I offer Robert Hollander's more elegant variant for comparison: 'While I was fleeing to a lower place,/Before my eyes a figure showed, faint, in the wide silence' (Alighieri, 2002, 7).

5. See, in particular, Borg (2012) and Moody (2017). And for a posthumanist reading that develops Ben-Zvi's and Rabaté's critiques see Walsh (2015).
6. Steven Connor comes to this theme from an overtly materialist perspective, noting that Beckett's references to radio in fact tend to problematise the traditional conception of radio space as an analogue of psychic space: 'Beckett's radio worlds are indeed highly interior, and many critics have been tempted to see the principal use of the sensory deprivation or sensory concentration of radio as affording Beckett an opportunity to focus undistractedly on the interior workings of the mind' (2014, 66). Yet, Connor argues, Beckett seems far more interested in that aspect of radio that seems to unmoor utterance from origin: 'the emphasis is not upon the space which radio occupies or constitutes, but rather on its emergence from nothing and nowhere. It is in radio that Beckett seems to have found the possibility of writing without ground' (67).
7. See, in particular, my reading of 'Echo's Bones' in Chapter 4 of Borg (2019).
8. It is worth stressing that the engagement with psychological disorders described here also entails a complication of Cartesian ontologies – precisely, an interrogation of the pre-eminence of reason in modern thought, a refusal of the body/mind distinction, and a modernist discourse on Mind that incorporates, and is unbalanced by, its own material and conceptual limitations.
9. Léger elaborates on his project in a brief essay published shortly after completing the film: 'consider, if you please: a pipe – a chair – a hand – an eye – a typewriter – a hat – a foot, etc., etc. [. . .] In this enumeration I have purposely included parts of the human body in order to emphasize the fact that in the new realism the human being, the personality, is interesting only in these fragments and that these fragments should not be considered of any more importance than any of the other objects listed. The technique emphasized is to isolate the object or the fragment of an object and to present it on the screen in close-ups of the largest possible scale. Enormous enlargements of an object or a fragment give it a personality it never had before and in this way it can become a vehicle of entirely new lyric and plastic power. I maintain that before the invention of the moving picture no one knew the possibilities latent in a foot – a hand – a hat' (1926, 7–8).
10. Indeed, as Jonathan Boulter observes, 'Beckett's characters may be posthuman but they are not fully *postcorporeal* [. . .] there is a compassion for the suffering subject who can really only understand herself and her world through the medium of a decaying, painful, body' (2008, 15; emphasis in original).

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